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ABSTRACT

In questionnaires given at the end of a freshmen writing course at the Utica College of Syracuse University, students characterized much of the writing they did for their portfolios as "fun" or "enjoyable." What they meant by this is not entirely clear, but it seems that since they chose what types of papers they would include in their portfolios--whether they were narratives, summaries, short stories, or short research projects--and since they found the revision of these papers fun, these activities could not possibly be "real" or "formal" academic training. In these evaluations, in other words, the students trivialized the enjoyable work they did because they have internalized what John S. Mayher has called the "castor oil syndrome," the belief that all "real" learning must be both boring and difficult. One misconception inherent in this myth is that expressive form of writing is without value, despite the work of James Britton and Peter Elbow, which has argued for the educational value of expressive or narrative-based writing. The castor oil mentality stands to cause real harm in the university because if students equate challenging with difficult and therefore give the difficult courses the highest ratings, instructors may pack their courses with unpleasant, possibly meaningless work because everyone seems to believe that is the only way people really learn. (TB)

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Students' Perceptions of "Creative" Writing: A Hidden Barrier to Educational Reform?

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by Patricia A. Dunn

CCCC, Nashville, March 17, 1994

Resistance to teaching and learning may take many forms. Sometimes the most insidious opposition is not hostile behavior, but positive, amicable comments that reveal deeply-held beliefs about what learning ought to look and feel like---assumptions that may subtly restrict pedagogical change.

For an English composition class, students completed a portfolio made up of a variety of texts: summaries, critiques, narratives, short stories, and short research projects. In negotiating the contents and due dates in conference with the instructor, students were encouraged to generate projects reflecting their own interests. While some chose to experiment with narratives and short fiction, most wrote the more traditional summaries and persuasive essays.

In questionnaires given at the end of the course, students characterized much of the writing they did for this project as "fun" or "enjoyable." What they meant by this is not entirely clear. John S. Mayher's theory of learning may help tease out an interesting interpretation of students' remarks. Arguing that some "commonsense" theories of learning have no basis in fact, he critiques one perception among students and teachers alike that "real" learning must be both boring and difficult, (cited in Allen 3). He calls this "the castor oil syndrome" ---the belief that if a task is "painful, it's productive; if it's fun, it's trivial and a waste of time"

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(Mayher 52). This misconception endures in spite of everything we know today about the need for active learning and student engagement in a project. Mayher blames this pervasive myth for what he sees as a lack of real progress in educational reform.

Related to these misconceptions about learning is the puzzling way in which students categorized their written texts. Although students sometimes referred to the different "types" of writing their portfolios contained, they also described all their portfolio writing as "creative." Why? One explanation is that they agree with some composition experts who today question the distinction between "creative" and "transactional" writing. However, a more reasonable explanation for their apparent contradiction of themselves---pointing to all the different types of writing and in the same breath describing it all as "creative"---is the belief that because the revising process was enjoyable, it could not possibly be "real" or "formal" academic writing. They perceived it as "informal" or "creative" because it was "fun." Having internalized Mayher's "castor oil syndrome," students unconsciously trivialized the enjoyable work they did, thinking it could not be legitimate learning.

One student seemed to suspect that this was happening. As Kevin wrote for several minutes filling out a questionnaire regarding the success or failure of the portfolio project, he seemed to be in the process of discovering the castor oil syndrome:

> *. . . most people would not "view the portfolio as 'work' in the classic sense. The simple reason for this is that it is just not the same old drudgery.*
>
> Kevin

Kevin's prediction that most people would not view the portfolios as "work" is demonstrated in the following student comments:

> *There is more room for fun in this style of writing than in any other. I have been challenged by the portfolio project though.*
>
> -Chris

Chris' surprise at being challenged by something enjoyable is revealed here by his use of the word "though." Sandy also seems to view any kind of writing she enjoys doing as being somehow inferior:

> *You are writing about something that you know about or have been through. It allows you to be less intellectual and more creative and descriptive. I think that it provokes a lot more thought, as strange as that may sound.*
>
> -Sandy

Sandy appears to view "intellectual" and "creative" as opposites, thinking it "strange" that creative writing helps provoke thought. She seems to conclude that if she writes on a subject about which she has some knowledge, the resulting text cannot therefore be "intellectual."

A close reading of these end-of-semester comments reveals in students an ingrained, and possibly limiting, view of writing, as well as potentially harmful misperceptions regarding the usefulness of creativity. In one breath, students seemed to both praise and disparage some of the writing they did. Although students claimed they had been intellectually

stimulated by what they called the "creative" writing, they expressed surprise that this "less intellectual" work actually taught them something.

There are two misconceptions here. One is that the expressive form is without value. James Britton has long held that this kind of writing is the key to intellectual growth (Prospect and Retrospect 1982). Peter Elbow, too, argues that "discourse that renders" is as important as "discourse that explains" (135-155). Not only is the narrative underestimated. So is the concept of "fun," a type of creative play that Vygotsky says "is a leading factor in development" in children, helping to foster the "higher psychological processes" (Mind in Society 101).

The second misconception concerns the students' judgments of what was in their portfolios. As we have seen, contrary to how many students perceived them, portfolios contained a variety of forms. Perhaps because these forms were chosen by the writers themselves and involved projects that mattered to them, students spoke of the extensive revising they did as "fun" or "enjoyable," adjectives not usually employed to describe teacher-assigned work. As the above student comments seem to suggest, the old puritan work ethic plus an "either/or" filing system concerning "work" versus "fun" may have influenced students subconsciously.

So how is this harmful? So what if intellectual growth occurs when students are enjoying themselves? If people learn without suffering through what they characterize as "work," so much the better, right? Yes, but there are dangers. First, on evaluations filled out at the end of a course, students tend to rate as "challenging" those courses they find most frustrating, and to characterize as "easy " those courses in which they had some measure of success---the work load and intellectual stimulation notwithstanding. They seem to equate "challenging" with "difficult," and

the more "difficult" they consider the course, the higher ratings the instructor receives. Therefore, it is often in the instructor's best interest to make the course as perversely difficult and baffling as possible, thereby assuring a reputation for "high standards."

This is sad. What is more, it can damage the way instructors plan their courses, tempting them to choose pedagogical models packed with unpleasant, possibly meaningless "work" because everyone seems to believe that is the only way people really learn. Creative assignments or student-centered approaches may be abandoned, ironically, because they succeed too well: students enjoy learning and therefore devote more time and energy to their intellectual life. If too many students receive "A's," however, their instructors are viewed as "soft," and the so called "challenging" instructors are hailed as the most serious, "rigorous" ones.

Class discussions must begin to expose these misconceptions, to engage students in a metacognitive analysis of what really happens when they learn the most. As all learners seriously address popular conceptions regarding knowledge and learning, the "castor oil" myth will be exposed and "creative" writing and enjoyable learning may win more of the respect they deserve.

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